

# A Christmas Rose.

MRS. POLLOCK'S student boarders gathered for the evening meal in gay humor. The day had been cold, the streets and cars crowded with Christmas shoppers. The freedom of the dining-room with its lights and savors thawed out a host of tongues.

However, when Austen May entered and took his place at the center of the long table opposite his landlady, he missed the usual airing of medical opinion. He looked across the table and saw, tucked under Dame Pollock's ample wing, a young girl of nineteen or twenty. He watched her with some curiosity, knowing Mrs. Pollock's seclusion of her own young relatives. Pretty the girl certainly was not. Austen May thought it a little sad that that deficiency should shield her from gallant attention. She held herself not ungracefully, with a grave composure which changed but once, when an inadvertent movement sent a napkin spinning to her opposite neighbor. She

Austen May's eyes with a quiet smile. The girl was lighting for the briefest moment and white, even teeth showing against her dark hair. She crossed the table and sat down.

"A real lady," said Mrs. Pollock to Austen May as she left the room. "Just noticed very, very much reduced. Her father was with Captain Pollock many a time, and when they could not count their money, and now it's all gone, and he's gone, and the captain. It is against my rule to have her, and it's not just the thing, but what can the poor child do in a strange city? And she's so brave."

Austen May left town for a day or two. He returned late one evening, and the new boarder entered the house ahead of him. The mail had just arrived, and as she passed the group that struggled for it a young fellow held up a letter and called "Nunez."

"Nunez," she emphasized, the color mounting to her cheeks at the imagined indignity. She turned from apology. When she came back to the dining-room she started to find Austen May belated like herself. She hesitated a moment at the door, then took her place, sliding her chair as far down her side of the table as arrangements would allow. While they waited to be served, Austen May took up the evening paper, and she had an opportunity to study his pleasant, fair-bearded face.

"My beef rare again?" he exclaimed, as the dishes reached the table. "What mortal man can endure this?"

"Take mine," said his neighbor, demurely offering her plate. "A change would suit me."

"It is strange," he said, "to be indebted to a lady for such a favor."

"How can I like meat, cooked or uncooked," she answered, "when a stove I have seen only lighted as a plaything?"

"Ah!" he sighed. "It must be charming to live on figs and mocking-birds' eggs—and earthquakes."

She laughed a little. "An earthquake and a long crack in the side of my house is dearer to me than your summer with thunder-storms and your Christmas with snow." She shivered as she spoke.

"Would you like to go back to your south country?" he asked.

"I could not go back to its idleness," she said quietly, and spoke again only in monosyllables.

May guessed her education from her fluent English with its clear enunciation. Her full, soft voice was in keeping with her lingering accent.

It was not many days after that Austen May looked down upon her from the elevated railroad. She came out of the first of a row of apartment houses, and he noticed how she differed in walk and carriage from the girls who passed—her light, elastic step and their quick, assertive tread; her graceful inclination and their rigid masculine



"YOU CAN'T SMELL 'EM THROUGH THE GLASS, BILLY."

FROM A DRAWING BY ALBERT SCOTT COX.



A CHRISTMAS DINNER INTERRUPTED—DRAWN BY E. NEWELL.

she said her husband once belonged to a citizens' vigilance committee, and this was the way they branded those the police could not reach. "I thought she broke my heart then, but you have given as hard a wound as even she could wish."

In the morning as Austen May took his hat to go out for the day, a note fluttered to the ground. His cheerful face was pale and serious as he opened it.

"Dr. May—I would offer an apology. I am unused to New York ways. Indeed I am, as Fern with Chili, so used to battle that kindness seems to me first as an ambush."

Rosita! It was strange he had never thought to ask her given name. He might have guessed it. He remembered how fond she was of humming, "Mira flores! Mira flores! See the flowers! See the flowers!" and how pathetically he had thought it when she would stop herself and summon a look of grave maturity to her face. His heart ached for her, and a little for himself. Her loneliness made her so unapproachable. Her note was a prescription for his heart, closely buttoned up upon it, but the writer withdrew from his horizon. Time his meals, his intrigues or outings when he would, it never proved her time.

The days passed, and it was the night before Christmas when he again met her. He had been thinking of her all day, feeling it odd and dreary for her, wondering if that detestable bluing had become sufficiently popular to warrant her presence among the Christmas shoppers. Something, he could not tell what, unless it was a remembrance of the offering of Tom Brown at Oxford to his lady love, led him to invest in a bunch of heliotrope. He neared home with it, inhaling its fragrance through the paper wrapping. He turned a corner quickly, his eyes upon his bundle, when he ran against Rosita Nunez, who slipped upon the icy walk and escaped falling by a quick grasp at an iron railing. A cry of pain escaped her. An iron spike had entered the palm of her hand. Austen May took the wounded hand in his, though she would have hindered him and drew out his handkerchief to bind it. He needed an application of snow first, and a strip or two of plaster from his pocket, but even that preparation seemed longer than might be.

"How could you?" he said in angry tones, though his touch was tender, and he knew he spoke of necessary evil. "It is so foolishly as to suppose you could get along such a night without rubbers—and ungloved, too?"

"Well," she said, with an embarrassed laugh. "I would have been prepared for an ordinary steam-engine, for that always whistles."

He looked up at her under his eyebrows for a moment. The wind was blowing her hair about her forehead and color in her cheeks, giving her the prettiness that poverty's repression had stolen from her youth and grace. She went on nervously:

"But will not your bundle blow away? It seems to me to have the fragrance of heliotrope; and, do you know, that always takes me back to Callao. That is our port, and I have sat in a yacht there and had my lap filled with heliotrope. It grows wild on the mountains, and you can beg it from the women who bring their flowers for the altars of Saint Rose of Lima."

Saint Rose of Lima pitied the sorrows of the poor, it she was rich herself, did she not?

"Why, yes?"

"If she had been poor, her own loneliness would have made her quite blind to any one else's, wouldn't it?"

"Dr. May, your handkerchief is a very bad color. I must recommend my bluing; or perhaps I can have it laundered properly for you, to show my gratitude."

Her voice shook, and she stepped quickly back as he released her hand.

"Thank you," he said, coolly. "Don't hurry about it," and, picking up his bundle, left her.

She summoned up her courage to go early to the evening table, as she had felt obliged to return to the house. At her place lay a magnificent bunch of heliotrope. She was the first on the scene. With a hasty hand she picked up the flowers, laid them across the table at Austen May's place, and fled. A few moments more and she was a-bashed. The noise of voices came loudly from the room, and she thought to slip in by an unfrequented lobby. As she entered one of its doors Dr. May entered the other with the heliotrope in his hand. She turned, but the door had closed behind her with a catch she could not move. Dr. May appearing not to see her, leaned against the other door. Voices came clearly through a transom above.

"May has been reminded of the proprieties, I fancy. Probably by the inamorate herself."

"Doubtless. Pity if there should be a misunderstanding. It's my opinion she knows more about flirting than he, if she suspects him of it. When May gets a heart-wound he's the kind to keep it; you may be sure."

"Oh, yes; these blond, gay fellows always do. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Pass the provisions, will you, you black-haired Lothario. May's the loneliest orphan I know, but who'd believe it?"

Rosita's face was crimson with shame and confusion. She touched the doctor's arm.

"Won't you manage the knob for me?" she cried, under her breath.

She turned on the sill and pointed to the flowers in his hand.

"Will you give me back a few of those?" she said, "for Christmas?"

"Do you know that would mean now that you must give me up your Bolton's bluing?" he said, looking down at her gravely.

"You are very, very rude," she cried, speeding away from him.

A while after as he sat alone at the dining table, she appeared before him.

"I can spare you half the sample box of bluing," she said. "You must wait for the rest."

He started to his feet.

"You cannot expect me to take it across the table," he cried. "That is too much like an ambush, you know."

"I will wait for you till you come round the table," she said, courageously, but another step than his somnolence, and she fled into the fatal lobby.

Rosita! said Austen May, "this is the second time you have trapped me here. We must have the battle out now."

He held her gently but firmly by the arms, her one hand having the box, the other being bandaged.

"Can you feel it more worthy of honor for you to stay on here as Bolton's agent and living for yourself alone or to seek for your pride and help yourself and me, too?"

"I have taken a very big swallow of my pride," she said, looking up at him reproachfully. "I am going to my father's friends—for your sake. She dropped her head, then raised it proudly. "For my father had friends who honored him. Dr. May."

Dr. May caught her to him and pressed a passionate kiss on the scar upon her ear. "Rosita! My little Christmas Rose!" he whispered.